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I'm no hero, I'm no martyr, and by no means I'm a victim. Those described on the next pages will only be good or bad depending on what the reader thinks of them. I, however...
Some time ago I was a soldier, and I killed following orders, then I was a survivor and I killed for food. Later I was a mercenary and I killed for a better life, and then I was a guardian and I killed for someone else. If any of those deaths meant something? I try not to think about it, and I don't answer that kind of questions while sober.
Sometimes I feel like I can't find meaning in life, and that I keep pushing for a sole objective: to find, in this ruin of a world full of dead cities, peace for the last valuable thing I have: Angelique.

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Chapter One: Angelique I

August 31, 2031

Entertainment media led us to believe, through movies, video games, comics, or TV series, that a man who has never touched a weapon in his life can grab two 1911 pistols from a desk, shoot with perfect aim, and emerge unscathed after killing all his enemies. After such a feat, the individual would simply walk away as if nothing had happened.

When did we allow ourselves to be lied to so much? Is obtaining a bit of entertainment worth accepting an ideal of reality that is completely false?

Tunnel vision, palpitations, cold sweat, tremors, incontinence, excessive stress, dizziness. Fear. Many soldiers turn their fear into their driving force. During a shootout, one keeps moving and responding purely due to the horrible intensity of the fear they endure.

In your hands, a revolver with only two bullets, and behind you, a pillar fifty centimetres wide receiving a heavy barrage of rifle ammunition. In a situation like that, everything that cannot ensure your survival ceases to exist for you. The voices of your comrades, the sound of casings falling, the elevated room temperature... nothing. It's just you with your laboured breathing, your weapon, and the insistent drumming of bullets behind you.

Everything is so false. Everything to which we've been accustomed for decades turned out to be so false... Me? I'm just

another product born out of all that falseness. The difference is, unlike your average citizen who goes to the office every day with the intention of doing as little work as possible, just letting the hours pass while discreetly ogling the younger colleague's ass, and then going back home to watch TV until falling asleep, I was forced to delve deeper into this falsehood we talk so much about. I was once that consumer product the office worker saw on his television and thought, "those men are real men facing death without fear," unaware that in my role as a soldier, I've seen more guys crying like little children, begging to see their mothers one last time before dying from bullets lodged in their lungs than I care to remember.

I am a former soldier, named Alez and with the last name Braviel. I apologize in advance if my writings end up disappointing you, as you won't find the story of a war hero deserving thousands of medals within these pages. You won't even find a story you want to identify with. This will just be one more story; you can take

from it what you want or even forget it, I don't mind. Just don't forget her; that's a small favor I dare to ask of you, reader.

September, 2030

Clutched on a strap, my Benelli M4 shotgun hung at my front. Another strap secured the reliable G36 rifle on my back, which I had stolen from a German soldier months ago. On my right side, snug in its holster, rested my 92FS pistol, and on my back, alongside my rifle, hung my backpack loaded with various essentials such as ammunition, food, and some items of clothing. The magazines for my weapons were stored in the inner pockets of my long coat, pockets I had sewn myself. In general terms, one could say that I carried a lot of weight.

"Wait, let me stop for a moment."

I walked heavily towards the nearest wall and leaned my back against it while

releasing a sigh, hoping it could dispel my fatigue.

"If you don't take off the backpack, the food will get squashed."

"Oh..."

Reluctantly, but nodding in agreement as there was truth in her words, I took off the backpack and placed it beside me. I closed my eyes for a few seconds, rubbing my nasal bridge, then lifted my head slightly to reassess the situation. I opened my eyes. We were walking along the sidewalk of a wide avenue, dilapidated commercial establishments with shattered glass scattered everywhere. The trees that had been planted to adorn the area had grown wildly and looked invasive. I wasn't sure of the exact date, but the air hinted at the changing season from summer to autumn, so it's safe to assume we were in September.

Some birds flew back and forth in the cloudy sky, often perching from bush to

bush. For them, things had changed for the better – the abandoned cities were now owned by birds free to live without civilization bothering them. A large tree stood a few meters away, and in its canopy, I saw two sparrows apparently passing through. As soon as I spotted them, they took flight rapidly, their wings flapping at full speed to distance themselves and disappear from my sight. The motion they caused when leaving the branches was enough to make some slightly dried leaves fall. One of those leaves gracefully descended, twirling in the air until it landed right on the head of the young girl who observed me with her impassive face, unable to conceal itself among her black hair.

"Hm?"

I reached out my hand to her, picking up the brownish leaf with two fingers.

"Yes, we are definitely entering autumn."

As was customary, Angelique contributed nothing to that one-sided conversation. Angelique. That was the name of the girl accompanying me then, and still does. Standing in front of me with a UMP 45 submachine gun in her slender hands and a pistol on her hip, she patiently awaited my command to proceed. That was always Angelique, with an air of absence but with a look of profound presence, silent and calm, waiting for orders.

"You can sit for a few minutes if you're tired too."

"No, I'm fine for now."

Angelique suffers from amnesia. She doesn't remember anything that happened before she met me – not her age, nor her real name. Yes, Angelique is just the name I chose for her.

"Are you really okay? Isn't your backpack

too heavy?"

"No, I can handle it."

"..."

"Your backpack is much worse, Alez."

"I'm used to it."

Her body is small. If I had to guess her age based on her physical development, I couldn't say she was more than thirteen or fourteen, but her voice, her face, and her silhouette suggested she might be fifteen or sixteen. Despite her small frame, Angelique quickly adapted to firing an automatic weapon. Her modest arms developed some strength, and her tibial muscles acquired some rigidity. It was inevitable, after all – walking all day, every day, carrying so much weight had to have its consequences.

"We'll continue along this avenue until it ends. If we're lucky, we might find a place that hasn't been looted and get something useful. Although I see that as very unlikely."

I fumbled through my many pockets until I found the small metal box where I keep my cigarettes. I remember having about seven left. I took one of them and lit it with the refillable lighter also stored in that little box.

"So, once we finish with this long street, we'll resume the route to the northeast. Maybe we'll have better luck there. The entire west is finished, and considering that even Croatia fell, the south most likely is too."

"And if it's as destroyed as everything else?"

"Then we'll head southeast."

"And if we don't find anything there either?"

"Then... we'll retrace our steps to see if Western Europe has been reclaimed."

"And what if-?"

"Can't get it out of your head?"

By that time, Angelique and I had been traveling together for about two and a half years. We started from France, crossed Belgium, Luxembourg, Germany, went down through the Czech Republic, then Slovakia and Hungary to avoid Austria. When we reached Croatia, we decided to give up on the south since the outlook was increasingly bleak. Every country we set foot in was either a no-man's-land or retained its government in an extremely small sector of the capital, heavily militarized enough to be called military governments even if the head of state was elected by the country's inhabitants. We heard that Switzerland still stood, to no one's surprise, but entry to the country was strictly forbidden for anyone, whoever they were.

Initially, the goal was to survive. But

how long could we stay alive alone on this continent that I had helped destroy? Bandits, food scarcity, military presence, restricted areas, the Amere group, heat, and cold—everything around us was extremely hostile, and our luck wouldn't last forever. That was when I decided to find a peaceful place for this girl to live, but that sounded easier than it really was. It wasn't a hasty decision; I had been toying with the idea for about a year, trying to ignore it, because giving up meant taking away any chance for this girl to have a truly peaceful life.

"I understand that walking so much that it seems like there's no end can tire anyone, but I still need to ask you to be patient."

She only nodded. Yes, to almost all my statements, all she did was nod. I thought that once her trust in me increased, she would open up and become more friendly. But no, that was just Angelique's way. Seemingly cold and distant, with little

interest in discussing anything.

"That's enough for now, let's continue."

I stubbed out the cigarette on the wall and stored it again in the metal box. I picked up the backpack, and without saying anything more since anything I said would provoke no response, I continued my march along that devastated avenue. Immediately, I heard the hurried steps of that girl following me. It no longer bothered me. Talking to myself had become a habit for me many years ago; the only difference now was that someone heard my words.

"We'll advance as long as we're allowed. We'll figure out how to overcome any adversity later."

"Alez."

"Yes?"

"I'm not sure, but... I think I heard something."

I had only taken about ten steps, but I stopped abruptly and turned to look at Angelique.

"Are you sure?"

"No, right at that moment, you were talking, and it's not impossible that I'm just confused."

Silence.

I kept my gaze fixed on Angelique without saying anything while gripping my shotgun with both hands.

Angelique has been my ears since I met her. I can't rely on my sense of hearing, so I have to trust her completely to detect strange noises. It took about a minute before she opened her mouth again and barely raised her eyebrows forward.

"Yes, now I can be sure. There are people talking up ahead."

"Can you discern how many people?"

"Maybe three, that is... a bit more complicated."

"How much farther ahead?"

"About a hundred meters."

"We have the advantage. We're in territory not claimed by any force, so they might just be looters. We'll proceed with direct elimination, Angelique."

"Understood."

Angelique changes when it comes to fighting. Her tone stops sounding so monotonous and becomes almost mechanical; it's terrifying. Not only that, her movements become perfect. She holds her weapon with such proper posture that it would be the envy of any novice soldier; her hands don't waste strength with improper grips, and her celestial eyes acquire the edge of a blade. I often wondered if I wasn't accompanied by a child soldier.

This was common for us; almost every week, we killed at least two people, so

there was no doubt about what we had to do. I had a shotgun, and Angelique had a submachine gun, so I was the one going in front. We pressed against the nearest wall and walked quickly and cautiously forward. Viewing the world through the iron sights of my shotgun made everything look much more fragile. Anything, regardless of its resistance, would not survive a 12-gauge shot from two meters away.

"Angelique."

I stopped in place and decided to gain more visual information about our surroundings. Without lowering my weapon, I leaned my torso a bit to the side to see the buildings ahead and then paid attention to the one directly next to us. There wasn't a single two-story building until about three hundred meters ahead; there were only more and more dilapidated commercial spaces.

"Go up; it will broaden our options. I'll continue down here, and we'll advance together. I want you to open fire without asking for permission once you confirm the number of targets."

"Understood."

I released my Benelli and clasped my hands to give Angelique a platform to jump and climb onto the roof. It was always so easy for her. Of short stature and with such a light body, it was as if she had the agility of a cat.

I signaled to advance with two fingers, and we continued our assault. Despite the height difference, we were still close to each other, which made us feel secure, as it always had been. Our steps were fast, and our concentration absolute. Yes, we had the advantage, but what good would that advantage be if we didn't know how to use it? There was still the possibility that we had been spotted by the enemy, and we were walking into a trap.

Only once I got close enough could I see

that a few dozen meters ahead, between two shops, ran a narrow alley, from which I could now hear voices escaping. I tightened my grip on the shotgun and put my index finger on the trigger; I was more than ready to take down any stranger who entered my field of view.

"Ange-"

"Tch!"

During the time I took my eyes off her, Angelique had advanced quite a bit. She looked at me from the roof, covering her lips with a vertically positioned finger to indicate that I shouldn't speak.

I nodded once and waited for instructions. I was fifteen meters from the entrance to the alley, a distance I could close in three seconds, while Angelique was crouched just five meters above the alley. At this distance, the voices were clear even to me, and it was evident that it was more of a heated argument than a conversation.

Angelique is quick and makes no unnecessary movements; seeing her move in a combat situation is truly satisfying. I think I became addicted at some point to the lightness with which her silhouette moves when she has a weapon in her hands.

She stretched out an open hand toward me, allowing me to clearly see the five fingers of her slender hand. Five enemies. She didn't take more time and turned toward the alley. She didn't even give me time to confirm that I was ready to enter. Not only that, but fleetingly, she closed the distance; she was about to open fire, so I had to take my position as soon as possible, or the improvised two-pronged attack wouldn't work. I ran at full speed toward the entrance of the ruined alley, but I heard the first shot when I was half a second away.

Angelique squeezed as much juice as she could from the element of surprise and eliminated one of the five men with a precise shot to the top of the head,

abruptly interrupting their heated conversation. She didn't give them time to take cover, as just when I was putting my first foot in my designated spot, she swept the area with automatic fire to break any possible chance of a quick counterattack.

The shotgun butt weighed heavily on my shoulder and provided my hands with enough support to move freely. When I finally saw the men whose lives we were about to take, the nerves I had been accumulating since Angelique went up to the roof slowly liquefied.

Their torn and battered clothes, all young except for one—the first to die—and barely armed. The corpse was crushing an AK, and the one closest to me, facing away, had a revolver in his left hand; the others only had knives or iron rods. But it was too late to think about the disproportion of our employed force; we were already in combat.

"Angelique! Don't waste ammo!"

"Understood!"

I opened fire, and the rest is predictable. With the first shot, I shattered the back of the head of the only target carrying a firearm. That man didn't finish falling, and I was already firing at the side of another person's head. The long gun shook violently, releasing luminous flashes. Hot empty casings flew one after another with each of my shots. I destroyed the chest of the third and then shot him in the face to ensure death. The last one alive had jumped over the corpse of the first to grab the AK, but his motor functions were halted instantly by four .45 bullets fired by Angelique that hit his neck and head. It was a small-scale massacre.

"Do you see any other movement? Hear anything?"

"No."

The assault lasted no more than three seconds and left us with the burden of five more lives. A rate of one death every 0.6

seconds.

I swept my hair back with one hand and stared at the deformed head of the second dead man, thinking about how little life was worth in our small apocalypse.

"Alez, help me down."

"Yes, jump."

I released my weapon and opened my arms to serve as Angelique's landing pad. She jumped and landed on me, wrapping herself around my neck, to which I firmly squeezed her soft torso to give her confidence. Before letting her go, I couldn't resist the urge to reach one hand to her head and give her a small caress.

"You did well. As always."

She simply nodded once and separated from me, giving me a modest smile. She never said anything about it, but it was evident in the way she avoided looking at the bodies of the men she killed, as much

as possible. She may have been accustomed to killing, but she never stopped being just a girl.

I, on the other hand, walked among the corpses, nudging them with the barrel of my Benelli as I reloaded.

"They don't have anything useful for us..."

I turned the last man killed by Angelique face up and focused on his face for a few seconds. He was really young, maybe a year older than Angelique. When did scenes like this stop making my chest ache?

"Let's go, we have nothing to do here."

Having regained her usual composure, my young companion only let out an almost inaudible "yes" and walked beside me to continue the journey down the deserted avenue, adorned with overturned cars and fallen power poles.

"Don't forget to change the magazine."

"Oh."

Clearly, she had forgotten, judging by her expression. Perhaps, trying to avoid a scolding, she was quick to replace the almost empty magazine of her UMP with a full one she had inside her jacket.

. . .

We walked in silence for about another hour until we reached the end of the avenue. It collided with a two-story mansion, surrounded by an extensive fence that covered almost an entire block. The facade of the mansion was in much better condition than one would expect. Black walls and a red tile roof, along with a wide chimney protruding from the center of the building. The iron of the fence was rusted, making it easy to knock down the metal gate to enter the property.

"What are we going to do in this place?"

"If the inside of the mansion is in as good a condition as the exterior, we will stay here."

"Are we going to spend the night here?"

"Tonight and the next. And the next, and the next."

"I do not understand..."

I lazily crossed the garden, looking on both sides. A brick path led from the sidewalk to the front door of the house. The grass on either side was truly overgrown, measuring about fifty centimeters tall.

"Alez, can you explain to me what..."

I didn't respond. I placed my hand on the doorknob as I pulled my Beretta from its holster. To my surprise, the door wasn't locked, so I opened it and entered the mansion with my gun ready to shoot down any stranger who might be inside. I could

also hear Angelique removing the safety from her UMP.

"No one's here."

My little hunch was correct. This mansion had never been looted or occupied by anyone. Upon entering, we found a spacious and dark living room with many doors and, at the end, a staircase that split into two on the second floor for easy access to both wings of the building. A large set of sofas, a small table in the middle on an extensive rug, and an elegant stone fireplace. There were no paintings on the walls, but there were still embedded nails, leading me to think that the property owners must have taken the most valuable things when they abandoned it. Everything was covered in dust but in very good condition. There weren't even footprints on the floor disturbing the thick layer of dust.

"It needs work, but it holds potential."

I holstered my weapon and turned to look at Angelique. Her expression was one of clear confusion, and she looked at me as if I had gone mad.

"What do you think?"

"About what?"

"About the house."

"It looks cozy, I suppose."

"Perfect. It's ours now."

Angelique's face went from confusion to disbelief. She lowered her submachine gun and stared at me with wide-open eyes, unable to believe that I, who had never stayed in the same place for more than a day, was deciding to stop traveling once and for all. She looked adorable.

"Ours? Are we going to live here? What about going northeast?"

"I changed my mind."

"But just today you were so determined

and..."

"I'm also tired of walking, Angelique. We'll take ownership of this mansion, make whatever repairs are needed, and live here. And... we'll wait. We're together, and we're armed, we can defend ourselves. If we run out of food, we'll find more. If there's no more to find, then we'll hunt. It might take years or even a whole decade, but every war must end someday. This will be our bunker until that day comes."

"..."

"If you hate the idea, then we'll continue on our way, and we'll forget this conversation ever happened."

A whole minute of complete silence. Today, I understand that she wasn't deciding if she wanted to stay in that mansion or not; she was trying to guess if I genuinely wanted to stop or if I was only doing it to please her. Angelique can be inconsiderate, but she's not a selfish person.

"..."

She nodded without saying a word, and it brought a smile to my face. The rest is less interesting. We cleaned the place from top to bottom and rearranged everything to our liking. It had everything we needed: from beds to wardrobes, a well-stocked kitchen, and clothes of various sizes. Also, an electric generator and a grand piano, but I'll leave the details for later. We still live in that mansion, in this dead village in the southwest of Poland, patiently waiting for the war to end and civilization to settle back into these forgotten streets.

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June 23, 2025, 03:49 Reply comment (/en/dashboard/story/comment/764143/vote/up/)

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Pseneth V @pseneth-v-75156 (/en/u/pseneth-v-75156/)

Only knew you from your GFL posts, now seeing your writing and it's fire, excited to see more of it

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April 20, 2025, 14:22 (/en/dashboard/story/comment/728566/vote/up/)

S A **SHIKI AllCaps** @shiki_all_capitals (/en/u/shiki_all_capitals/)

Nice chapter. I'll continue this later, but I already want to know more about Angelique!

March 05, 2025, 19:31 Reply comment (/en/dashboard/story/comment/709014/vote/up/)

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Hey thanks a lot for giving it a try! I'm glad that you liked it.

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Ctrlalta🇵🇭 @noel702418471657889693 (/en/u/noel702418471657889693/)

Damn first chapter and it's already got me hooked to the story

Reply · July 5, 2022, 13:00 ♡ (/en/dashboard/story/comment/269992/vote/up/)

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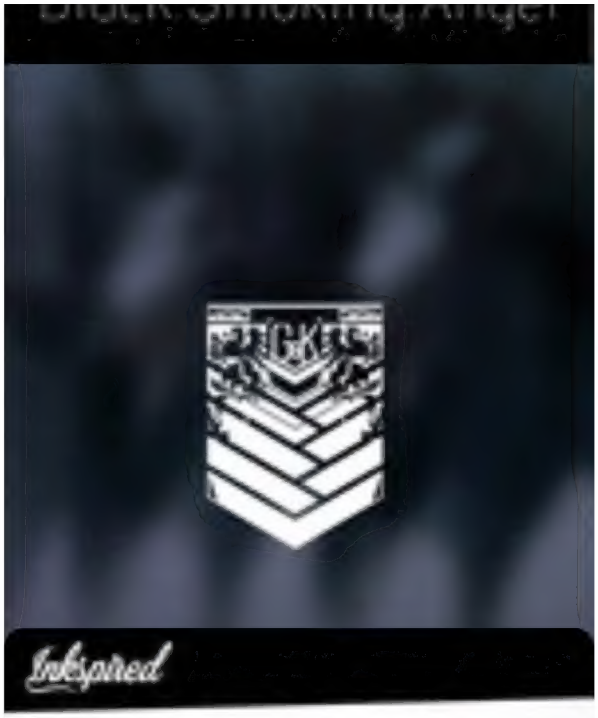

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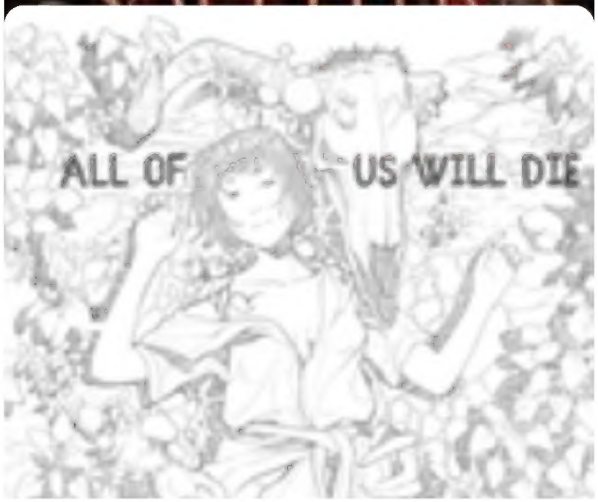

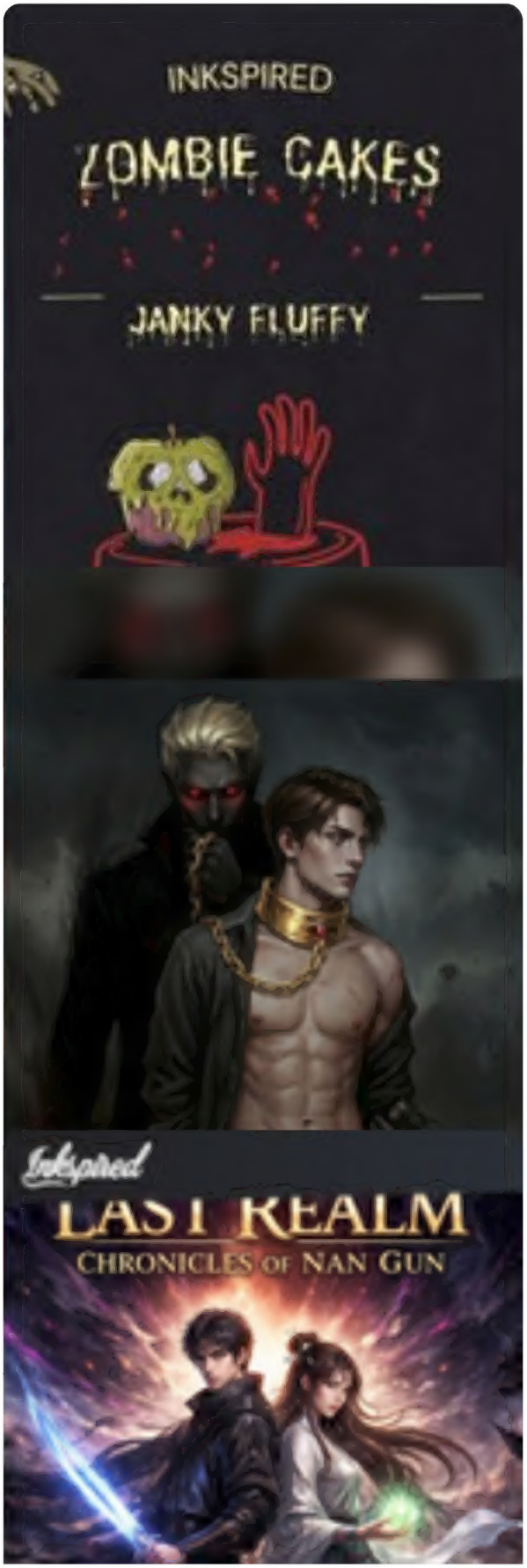

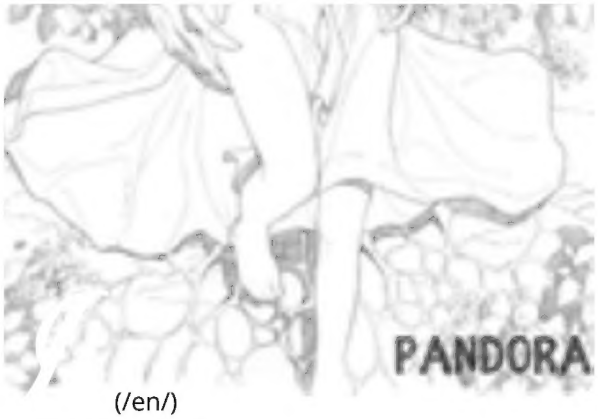

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